

The Windy Month.

"The opening year is full of Thee!" Nature is roused from her winter sleep. The birds, her natural choristers, are celebrating the levée. Day by day they are re-visiting our shores from southern lands. Among the hills, the rich brown mountain finch slides and glides into our notice; on the gorse-clad heaths and commons those handsome birds the stone-chat and whin-chat may be seen, nearly always perched on the topmost parts of the bushes, whence they utter their breezy cries. The rooks are busy on the tree tops, for their egg season is on, and it is an important time with them, as we may gather from the clatter of ornithological debate going on overhead. Not far away, in quieter and more solitary spots, the wood pigeons are engaged in the same absorbing and self-denying occupation. The chiff-chaff has arrived, for we can hear its peculiar cry, even though we rarely see the bird, whose shyness prevents its personal introduction to us. The thrushes and blackbirds are nesting and sitting; their nests are constructed of strong, durable materials, and so placed in the hedgerows and thickets that the more the greenery develops the better they will be concealed.

In our solitary March walks our slight knowledge of and sympathy with natural history objects is a constant and unalloyed delight. You look for old friends in the freshly-opened flowers, and listen to welcome voices in the newly-arrived birds. A year has come and gone since we saw and heard them under such circumstances before. Much may have taken place in our own lives and circumstances since then, but these sights and sounds of early spring make us feel younger, for they carry us back to past years when we were really so.

Passing along this quiet country road, just where a fir

plantation borders one side, you may perchance hear a series of low, short, crisp bird calls. You have only to stand perfectly still a few minutes, and the callers will come into sight, and take no more notice of you than if you were a post. They are in pairs—solitary pairs. Call answers to call, although the birds are only a few feet or yards apart—crawling, hanging, flying short flights. Did you ever see such bonny bird darlings? You fall in love with them in a moment; they are so small, so bold, so perky, altogether so comical! I need not say I am alluding to one of the smallest and prettiest of our British birds, the gold-crested wren—a much commoner bird than many people imagine, if you only take the trouble to look and listen out for it. Its nest will be found by-and-by, very likely on the under side of one of the lower and denser fir or larch branches.

The garden warbler is chirruping its low, sweet notes in the hedgerows; the robin redbreast—"faithful among the unfaithful found," for it remains with us in England all the year round—has ceased the melancholy song to which we were accustomed in the winter months. It is now up to the eyes in domestic work, and you may easily find its nest in the hedge bank by the litter of dead brown leaves it has carelessly left over when nest-building. If you find the bright-eyed, bold-eyed dam sitting, look out for a well-pecked finger, for she is Briton enough to defend her hearth and home to the utmost. The black cap warbler has arrived, as its well-known song proclaims; so, too, has the sedge warbler, or "Irish nightingale"—so-called because its soft, sweet notes are frequently heard at night, so that it has been frequently mistaken for its more musical namesake. The greenfinch is singing its canary-like song; amid the thickening chorus you recognise the voice of the hedge accentor. Towards the end of the month the low, shrill notes of the grasshopper warbler may be heard, for the bird has by that time probably revisited us. The willow warbler and redstart will very likely have joined the increasing orchestra of the woods and fields. The chaffinch and yellowhammer are rapidly assuming their highest and brightest plumage, for they are all going a-courting. As March tails out the migrant birds increase; there is something fresh and interesting to notice every day. Fortunately for them and other songsters, the "Wild Birds Protection Act" commences its supervision from the 1st of March till the 1st of

August, although it is by no means so "protective" as it might be if public opinion were more decisively expressed concerning the vandalism of robbing nests of their eggs and young. To our song birds we owe the music of the green lanes and woods of Old England. It wouldn't seem summer to us without them, in spite of leaves and flowers. Compare a ramble amid the woods and fields of sunny France with a similar one in England. In the former you are struck with their birdless silence, for the songsters are shot, trapped, and robbed of their eggs, until the country is voiceless!

But, if the magic spell of the "opening year" has awakened the birds to song, and summoned here the migrants from southern climes, it has not been less active in stirring our English insects into renewed life. Perhaps they are even more sensitive and responsive to the increasing light and heat than the birds. All through the winter, on bright warm days, a ruddy "tortoiseshell" butterfly may be seen occasionally flitting up and down, and settling for a moment on the drier and warmer parts of the road. Perhaps it will call for a paragraph in some newspaper about the "remarkable mildness of the season"—the writer not being aware that this is one of our few double-brooded butterflies, and that these occasional winter-flying specimens are those which have been hybernating since October, and have been warmed into a few hours life by a winter day's sun.

That finer exquisitely shaped and coloured butterfly, the "Brimstone" (*Gonepteryx rhamni*) is certain to be seen on similar days, haunting the sunny side of the lanes and roads. When it settles down, notice how the angles of the outer wings when closed cause it to resemble a yellowish green leaf so closely that, even if you were hunting for it, you might pass it by! This is an apt illustration of *mimicry*, or the protective resemblance which living things assume. If you closely follow a brimstone butterfly as it settles down, it seem to vanish like a ghost. Like one also it springs up again suddenly.

Look out on these early Spring days for those most gorgeous of our native butterflies, the "Red Admiral" and the "Peacock." The former is the larger of the two, and the inner surfaces of its wings are a dainty mosaic of black, white, and red. The "Peacock" is so named from the large, eye-like rings of bluish-black, grey, and red, on similar parts. Both insects

have a trick, when settled down on a sunny bank, of opening and closing their wings at rythmical intervals. If I remember some of my early reading aright, the late Isaac Taylor, in that delightful book of his "The World of Mind," suggests that they do this because they love to admire their own beauty. I suppose it reminded him of a lady before her own mirror.

Among other freshly-appearing butterflies which either revive from their winter's torpidity in their hybernating stages, or else are developed as the month grows on from their chrysalis condition, are the "Green Veined White," the "Small White Cabbage," and the "Painted Lady." On warm evenings the moths begin to appear; at first few in number, but increasing with the lengthening days. They may be found in the daytime by a very careful search closely squatted on tree trunks, branches, hedge-banks, and hedges; and you cannot but notice how marvellously the tints and markings of their wings resemble their surroundings, so as to protect them. Among the moths which should be sought for, and will be certainly found during the month of March, are the "Light Orange Under-wing," the "Dotted Border," the "Early Grey," the "Tissue Moth," the "Early Thorn," the "Herald," the "Quaker Moth," the "Clouded Drab," &c.

The sunny banks on the roads and lane sides are always the places to look for insects on the wing. There is almost the difference of a climate between the sunny and the shady sides. Some of the larger two-winged or dipetrous flies begin to turn out in force. A few are clad in metallic green and ruby, and their colours delight the eye like those of flowers. Gnats rise in the air, especially in the evenings which precede fine days; an occasional dragon-fly puts in an appearance towards the end of the month; at which time, in places where the ground is dried by those March winds that have made a peck of dust worth a king's ransom, you will see the black ants issuing forth, and making arrangements for their summer campaigns.

But if the flowers did not appear clad in their glorified robes from the winter's resurrection, nearly all these insects would be foodless. For them they secrete honey, and manufacture superabundant stores of pollen, in return for which the important function in floral life is performed, namely that of cross-fertilisation. The fields are now putting on their floral

wedding garments, and on bright sunny days the chequered gold and silver of the buttercups and daisies which are thronging the meadows with delight, and telling of happy hours to come, are a sight never to be forgotten. In the damper parts of the meadows and along the margins of the runnels which flow through them, the marsh marigolds appear in all their golden glory, the "Mary buds of golden hue," of which Shakespeare speaks. Like the anemones which are now appearing in the woods, and which belong to the same order (*Ranunculacæ*), a slight observation will show that these flowers have no real petals, but that the delicate markings and tints and rich colour are assumed by parts which in most flowers are usually green, viz., the sepals, so that no coloured petals are necessary. This is a bit of floral domestic economy well worth making a note of, and is one very characteristic of the order above mentioned. Whilst speaking of buttercups and their relations I would draw attention to one of the earliest kinds (*Ranunculus bulbosis*), or St. Mark's turnip, which can be easily identified by the swollen underground part of the stem which has obtained for it its common name.

But the greening lanes and old walls are the places to look for early spring flowers. One can hardly help being struck by the eagerness with which they love to blossom. Whereas the summer plants deliberately leaf first and flower last, the spring kinds reverse this order more or less. The coltsfoot, hazel, willow, and to a great extent even the violets, flower before they leaf. One of the most noticeable, smallest, and prettiest of early British flowers, abundant in all old walls and dry banks, is the willow grass (*Draba verna*), a cruciferous species. Notice the pretty rosette arrangement of the small leaves squatting so closely to the place of growth, from the centre of which rises the frail flower-stalk crowned by a few almost microscopical white flowers. A sixpence would almost cover the humble area of growth required by this unambitious plant. In the shadier parts of the lanes at the base of the hedges you will probably observe a clump of brighter green, and perhaps your attention may have been drawn to the exquisite shape of the leaves. These plants are the moschatel (*Adoxa moschatellina*). Its delicate flower-stalks are crowned with five

pale green flowers, four being arranged in a sort of solid square, and the fifth crowning the top. The root has a faint musk-like smell. This humble plant belongs to the order Aralias, whose headquarters are in Japan. You can hardly imagine why it has got so far away from its native centre, but the same difficulty would apply to the ivy, which is partly covering the same bank and climbing up the adjacent trees, for they are both members of the same order, unlike though they seem, and are also the only two species represented in our British flora. Here, too, the wild strawberry is growing, one of the prettiest-leaved of our English plants; and, close by, is its first cousin, the yellow potentilla. The purple-flowered dead-nettles now strongly flank the basis of the hedge-rows, whilst their near ally, the white dead-nettles, are growing even more rankly lower down. Keeping company with them is the dark blue-flowered ground ivy. The sweet violets, blue and white, betray their hiding-places by their delicious perfumes. The exquisite minute-flowered forget-me-not (*Myosotis collina*) clusters in clumps on the dry banks, where, perhaps, an early specimen of the bright blue germander speedwell may be found.

On the clay soil in woods and nooks the primroses have gathered in their hosts; in the meadows, the earliest cowslips have put in an appearance, in company with the lilac-tinted ladies' smock or "cuckoo flower," and the creeping yellow crow-foot. The shrubs and woods are "dim with the misty green of budding leaves." The tide of spring life is flowing in rapidly. All the earth and air is loud with bird music. The sunny winds, even when easterly, stir one's blood like old wine. Day unto day is uttering the speech of nature; night unto night revealing her knowledge. It is a time to live, to think, to ponder, and to grow reverent in!

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